

Lothian care homes under pressure after spike in Covid-19 cases

The number of Covid-19 outbreaks in Edinburgh's care homes more than doubled between December and January, as students and council staff were drafted in to help under-pressure social care services.

Nearly 30 care homes were forced to close to admissions over Christmas and new year as Coronavirus cases spiked.

And despite a drop in infections over January and the continued easing of restrictions, Edinburgh Integration Joint Board (EIJB) Chief Officer Judith Proctor has warned the health and social care system in the capital is still under "intense pressure", with staff shortages and growing waiting lists.

She said the risk arising from the various pressures on Edinburgh's healthcare system remains "critical".

Figures published in her report to EIJB members ahead of a meeting next week show that in the week beginning 6 December when 4,825 positive PCR tests were recorded across the Lothians, 11 care homes in Edinburgh were closed due to outbreaks.

By 29 December, when the number of weekly cases had more than tripled to 16,663, 21 homes were forced to close, with this figure peaking at 29 at the end of the first week of the new year as infection rates started to fall.

The most recent data, from 13 January, shows 27 remained closed to admissions.

Meanwhile, staff shortages have led Edinburgh Health and Social Care Partnership (EHSCP) to call in help from council staff working in 'non-essential' operational service areas, who are being sent in 12-week blocks to "support the direct delivery of care and supporting functions".

The report adds: "Work is being undertaken to support staff moving into the Partnership, ensuring that they are appropriately trained and supported to safely deliver the required roles and care."

Furthermore, EIJB says it is working with Edinburgh College to recruit students to the NHS Lothian staff reserves scheme to assist with the delivery of care.

Although it has been reported that uptake was "low" prior to Christmas, there is now a focus on "targeting students on their return from festive leave".

Ms Proctor said: "The extent of pressures on the HSC system is without recent comparable precedent. The underlying causes are multi-factoral, the extent to which it could worsen is unknown, and the resolution is very challenging.

"It requires concerted and resolute action across a number of fronts. Our response will always take account of the latest standards and guidance and we will continue to run our services in ways which minimise the risk of harm to people.

"It should be recognised however that, during these unprecedented times, there are likely to be occasions where

the level of the demand we are facing temporarily overwhelms our ability to run services safely.

“We will continue to ensure that we are clearly communicating that fact, and any available options to mitigate the impact, to our service users, patients and the wider community so that they may assist in preventative and supportive measures where possible.”

A spokesperson from the Edinburgh Health and Social Care Partnership said: “Like the rest of Scotland, in Edinburgh we’re continuing to face challenges around care staff shortages, which have been further impacted by the pandemic. We’ve a put in place a number of measures already, and will continue to do all we can both directly and with our partners to meet the care needs of people across the City.

“To help, the City of Edinburgh Council has recently put out an appeal to council staff to gauge interest in supporting colleagues in health and social care – either in terms of swapping roles on a short term basis or working extra hours. This process is ongoing and notes of interest are still being processed.

“Care roles are registered roles with strict standards so naturally, anyone who is successful and taken forward, will be fully supported via a training programme that will include a blended approach of face to face and online training. Importantly, ongoing support will be available including initial shadowing support in the early stages.”

by Donald Turvill, Local Democracy Reporter

The Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) is a public service news agency: funded by the BBC, provided by the local news sector, and used by qualifying partners. Local Democracy Reporters cover top-tier local authorities and other public service organisations.